

SO YOU THINK YOU'RE POLITICAL?!

Seven notes on the harmlessness of art

Veda Popovici

#1 “...what you are doing is a symbolical gesture and it remains in the repertoire of a happening”¹,

said the rector of the University of Bucharest to a heterogeneous group of people that had organized the occupation of the History Department in November 2011. During the rector's visit, he was especially keen on convincing the occupiers that what they were doing was merely a happening - referring to the specific art historical term related to performance art- that it could not be more than a symbolical gesture, or in other words, that was only *art*. It seemed that contemporary art provided the rector with a concept that could (in his view) efficiently discourage the occupiers and eventually make the whole action fail.

The rector's words stayed with me for a long time, making me wonder: how come this figure of authority thought that art was precisely the best way to neutralize the disturbing potential of this political gesture? It was clear that, for him at least, legitimate art needs to be a separate realm from politics, and that art has no potential to change the configuration of power. But even more importantly, it emphasized a key function of contemporary art: its ability to provide authority with tools (concepts and images) to neutralize and domesticate political acts. In the specific context of the Bucharest occupation, it made me think that if one of the most powerful people in the educational system at that time used this idea in his attempt to stop a radical protest, then clearly this function of art has become essential to the present-day configuration of art and politics. Several events in the following year brought me back to this idea.

#2 Art and legality

Article 3 of law 60/1991 concerning public gatherings in the Romanian legislation states that “any public manifestation of artistic, religious or sportive character does not need any authorization to be performed.” So art, religion and sports enjoy first-hand the status of “freedom of expression”. Other gatherings, political in nature, must be announced (according to the Romanian Constitution) and officially authorized (according to law 60/1991), thus only having a second-hand “freedom

of expression” status. Of course, the illusion of “freedom of expression” elides a clear dichotomy made by the authorities in the allowance of the harmful potential: art, religion and sports supposedly have no politically disturbing character.

Article 3 became very popular among activists in 2011 and 2012 in Romania, as they realized that it could be a way to organize a political action without: a) being banned and fined in the absence of media coverage, which usually happened with many illegal actions that often got leaked to the police; or b) getting through the bureaucratic, abusive procedure of getting authorization for their political actions. As long as they declared that their actions had artistic connotations, they would be legally, and at least temporarily, covered. This shortcuts all the risks that getting an authorization entailed: submissive confrontation with authority, revealing the protester’s intentions, changing the date and location of an action and the risk of failure because of not getting approval. In legal terms, all of this could be avoided provided that protesters would be familiar with contemporary art practices such as happenings, performance, re-enactments. These activists continued to apply these tactics not so much out of love for legality, but out of the need to actually organize public actions and to have visibility for their contestatory discourses. This practice spread widely amongst protesters, configuring direct actions as artistic interventions. Using the so-called harmless status of art given by the authorities to carry out political interventions gained much popularity and certain strategies like the flash-mob became prominent.

A thin-ice, typical of current subversive practices, emerged. At once, this new tendency seemed both efficient and a failure. On the one hand, the protesters were strategically using art’s harmless status to perform radical political discourses. The status of an art piece was necessarily temporary and strategic: art had to merely be a means for the actualization of a strong political message in public space. On the other hand, the codification of political messages in art’s harmless clothes often neutralized the message itself, placing it in the ambiguous realm of art’s “anything goes.” To reiterate art as the only legal framework of performing real political freedom gives the measure of that freedom: in legal terms, it is only possible as art. Playing out this situation can end up disturbing or confirming authority. It may reiterate spectacle (the fake setting of freedom in contemporary liberal-democratic contexts) or contest it because of art’s designated function to conveniently dwell between “it’s just art” or “it is radical politics through art”. The questions to be asked become: for whom is it convenient? And who is tricking whom?

#3 On “creativity and imagination”

Coming from a similar activist background like the initiatives described above is an activist educational project based in Bucharest begun in 2012. Entitled “the school of activism,” the project debuted under the name CRIM, an acronym for creativity and imagination. As stated by the organizers, CRIM’s main focus is to educate young people in what regards the importance of civic political involvement within

one year. The methods they used include debates, screenings, games, contemporary art shows and flash-mobs². A series of events that took place in June boasted³ workshops on creating banners, making stencils, shouting slogans and a happening. The civic involvement thus translated into the appropriation of methods that could be labeled as civic disobedience, or as simply the right to protest.

Although CRIM also refers to the connection between art and direct action, it does not push the limits of both what is understood as (performance) art and direct action. Instead, it uses precisely the neutralizing concepts of art, as defined by the authorities: creativity, free expression, fun, in other words the hallow language of multiculturalism. But most importantly, it stresses the importance of *the how* instead of *the what*: it seeks to create a methodology of being creative while being rebellious, without any clear reference as to what one was supposed to be rebellious against. This deep political ambiguity is perfectly enacted in the vocabulary of the “creative class” and its realm of trendy lifestyles.

#4 Bucharest, January 2012 and after

In January 2012, spontaneous anti-governmental mass protests broke out in University Square in Bucharest. Backed up by well organized ultra-groups, the protests included students, revolutionary veterans, civil activists and other social groups. The heterogenous masses that made up the revolts carried various messages that generally affirmed dignity through radical anti-governmental, anti-austerity and anti-Troika⁴ slogans, placards and manifestos. Although not numerous (the maximum reached more or less five thousand people), the protests were long-lasting (around two months) and generally seen as an expression of genuine revolt and voicing of various social groups, gaining significant symbolic capital in the year to come. Interestingly enough, here too, just like at the occupation of the History Department a couple of months earlier, were voices that pushed the mass manifestation in the realm of “this is only art”.

One evening during one such mass protest, a playful message was published on the contemporary art mailing lists: an art gallerist together with an art critic were inviting the art scene to join a mass art performance.⁵ It is unclear whether the message was expressing some type of solidarity calling the people of the art scene to join the protests, or if it was a cynical reflection on the ultimate harmlessness of the protest by comparing it with an art piece. The latter interpretation seemed to gain more validity when another Bucharest art critic made a similar call.

The protests were already lower in intensity but still going on when a review of a recent art show was published.⁶ The review seemed a mere pretext for discrediting the anti-governmental protests that went on in University Square. The critic defined the protests as mere “lifestyle performances”. From the comfortable “objective perspective” of this enlightened intellectual, the subjectivity that was emerging in the square was already that of the spectacle, a “zoon aesthetikon”. What is mostly

interesting here is how this critic denied the true violence and risk of the bodies performing politics and neutralized any potential of these protests by integrating them to an artwork.

The joyous, laid-back irony of all these reactions is the cynical tone of authority discrediting its challengers. While gallerists and art critics were ironically mollifying the protests by assimilating them into art, mass-media representation was already undertaking its mission of gradually and steadily turning the protests into a mass spectacle.⁷ One can see both tendencies originating from the same locus of consolidating authority and subordination mechanisms and using a very similar logic of neutralization: art's harmless status to turn a political action into mere spectacle. The spectacle of mass protest, an increasingly popular practice of discreditation in the media functions as a domesticating tool of the political, and it is being appropriated through various embodiments of authority and capital, and not just the mass-media.

The Debordian critique of the spectacle gives warning about the spectacle's need to continuously incorporate, appropriate and co-opt social elements, especially those with politically disturbing potential.⁸

#5 Art and Spectacle

If the spectacle is a social relationship between people mediated by images⁹ and art is a historical stage of culture in which representation is instituted as way of knowledge, the relation between art and spectacle lays in their common need of representation. Following Debord's theory, two conflicting tendencies can be discerned in art: one that confirms the institution of the spectacle by staging communication and community; and one that points to the impossibility of communication and community in the contemporary configuration of capitalism.¹⁰ Art must end itself so as to fulfill self-criticism and acknowledge that it is unable to render real communication and community. Art must end before it turns into spectacle that is, "the rigid institution of appearance as truth"¹¹. Thus, although it can produce spectacle by reinforcing representation as hegemonic reality, art is fundamentally distinct from it: it can make evident the impossibility of dialogue and the staged nature of certain images, their artificial character. By emphasizing the artificial character of representation, art creates space for the desire of real communication and it can provide a social context to develop practices towards real community.

The art system, and thus the institutionalized social conditions of art, have however, went through important changes since the period of the 1960s when *The Society of Spectacle* was written. Reconfigurations of art's social and economical functions include: the urban process of gentrification, the emergence of Richard Florida's *creative class*, or even more recently, as a result of the so-called financial crisis, the acknowledgment of art as an ultimate commodity alongside gold. These

changes confirm and even surpass the Debordian vision of the importance of art in advanced capitalism. The crucial role art now plays in the contemporary configuration of the global capital can be seen as one of the privileged fields of negotiation between agents of authority and agents of subversive change. On this field of negotiation the sole importance of art is not at stake, but its legitimizing/de-legitimizing potential, in other words what we would call its harmlessness vs. its harmfulness.

#6 the harm-full/-less

The tension between the harmlessness and the harmfulness of art can be translated as the need of authority to institute art as being a fundamentally autonomous, separated field from politics, and thus unable to challenge it in a meaningful way, and the tendency of contestatory politics that propose art as an accessible, socially flexible field from which authority can be efficiently undermined. It is precisely this tension that was very visible in such projects as the Berlin Biennale 7¹² and later in the *Truth is Concrete* camp at Graz, Austria in September 2012.

The two-week marathon camp *Truth is Concrete* sought to bring together artists and activists from around the globe to share practices on the limits of art and activism and simultaneously gain visibility in a Western-based art system and audience. This was not the sole ambition of the marathon. It needed also to be a “machine”, an object of performative nature producing its own, new performative events.

Truth is Concrete obviously refers¹³ to the Debordian tension between art’s force of revealing the staging of the truth (that is the spectacle) and its tendency to institute representation as ultimate communication, thus making way for the hegemony of the spectacle. So, going beyond the “contemporary activism” trend, the project was intended to bring into (Western) visibility practices and methodologies from around the world that efficiently combine, super-impose or extend the limits of art and activism. Although not clearly visible from the start, the project’s most important faulty points are already subsumed in these descriptive phrases. I will elaborate on three of them:

- 1) the Western frame of visibility, although at first glance legitimate, shortly revealed itself as a power mechanism that marginalized non-Western discourses and privileged the Western ones, as being the most refined (or advanced) methodologies and concepts. From the privileged time-frames given to superstar panelists, to the most popular protesters’ methods that were developed and could mostly be applied in a Western context, this situation became prevalent quite soon, silencing by omission non-Western experiences shared by a big crowd attending the camp.
- 2) the ambiguity of the political frame put together groups or individuals so far apart that exchange was excluded, thus delegitimizing dialogue as premise for the whole event. The necessity of parrhesia as theorized by Gerald Raunig¹⁴ (also present at the event), the delivery of truth or the uncompromising affirmation

of radical ideas as opposed to ambiguity was elided. Mixing various, at times incompatible political positions resulted in enacting ambiguity and relativity. 3) the staging of radical political practice consisted in appropriating from autonomist and anarchist strategies (ex.: camp mode, shared responsibilities, open platform for expression). This staging culminated in the organization of a direct action in the city of Graz (see photo 1). The action in itself is interesting because it shows a direct consequence of subsuming radical political practices into art. The spectacular action filled with choreography, march, noise, performance, stenciling and vandalism ended up entertaining the locals and posed no real threat to the political status quo (see photo 2).

#6 Art and legality (2)

From a legal point of view, there is an important distinction between radical politics/direct action and art. In the contemporary Western legal systems, art is seen as a fundamental right. There is therefore a tendency to tolerate, legalize and defend something that is considered art. Enacted radical politics are always directed towards forms of governmentality, and the most cohesive expression of this governmentality is the law. Take the form of revolution as the privileged form of enacted radical politics: it is fundamentally illegal. It is this definite distinction between the tendency of legalizing art and illegalizing radical politics that is at the core of the configuration of the harmlessness of art. A position of authority will try, just as the rector in Bucharest, to show that a certain action is merely art, already legal, already part of “democracy”.

Thus, the importance of a particular moment in any action emerges: the moment in which it stops being art and becomes politics. From the subversive position, this moment is necessary as, for the position of authority the inverse moment is as necessary: the moment in which politics becomes art. In other words, art can be used to push the limits of legality, to test the borders of the state’s governmentality. However, given that this governmentality is intricately linked with global capital, it cannot but address it in terms of censorship and control through financing. In the partial framework of the law, art offers the possibility of using a citizen’s participation in legality and in the legitimating authority this endorses as tactical method for enacting a radical discourse. However, it is its legalizable status that can be used to tame or domesticate a political act.

#7 Us, the harmless

Back in University Square in Bucharest, on the 1st December 2012, the Romania’s national day, an action was performed by a group of 10, including myself. *The Other Flags* action was part of the project *The Other Us*.¹⁵ Organized as a workshop for reimagining identity, *The Other Us* concentrated on developing a critical stance on nationalism, national identity and investigating the revolutionary potential of identity politics, particularly from a feminist and decolonial perspective. Part of the workshop was a process of producing flags (old or new) to be worn in a public

protest on the 1st of December, breaking the monopoly of the national flag and reclaiming political presence for *the Other*, whomever this may be. To investigate the dynamics of legality, we attempted to obtain an authorization for the event.

Although, as stated above, artistic manifestations don't need authorizations, I sought to negotiate it for the sake of investigating further on the harmless status of art in the eyes of authority. The hearing went pretty badly: art, artists were not very interesting for the Public Gatherings Commission until it was clear that the protest would consist of non-national flags waved around in public space. It seemed that a limit of the harmless was reached with the symbols of the nation. The manifestation was described as anti-Romanian and I myself was repeatedly warned on the criminal danger of bringing offense to the national flag.¹⁶

In terms of the subject of the workshop, this only confirmed the urgency of deconstructing national subjectivity and rethinking identity politics. It also showed an awareness of authority for the effective use of art's harmlessness to political ends, and thus an awareness of art's potential harmfulness. However, as showed in the video, the action was performed freely and without any interference from the authorities. The political message went through in public space, however it did not present any threat to *authorities*. This may very well mean that it was *harmless*. If we think of the harmlessness of art as a political tool to neutralize any subversive



The Other Flags action, 1st December 2012 (National Day of Romania), Bucharest.

potential to existing power structures, what lays beyond this? It may very well be that the powerful ones need to institute a definite status of art's harmlessness that confirms art's harmfulness. Thus, investigating exactly what images and concepts authority uses to institute the formal harmlessness of art may shed some light on the blind spots of the same authority. It seems that one of the most important of these is art's ability to turn a political action into a spectacle, it's mere artificial staging, breaking the urgency, actuality and reality of the message.

On the negotiation field of art's harmlessness, tactical identifications can be efficient. By tactically – that is temporarily – using art's harmless status, agents of radical politics can access social spaces that, otherwise, do not welcome them: public squares, sidewalks, museums, etc. However, there must necessarily be a moment where a certain action stops being art and is proclaimed politics. We must keep in mind that what enables this negotiating field is the flexibility of defining both art and politics, and it is this flexibility that should be used to push the limits and definitions of not only art and politics but most importantly the state, law, citizenship, and above all to question capitalism.



Photo 1: Reverend Billy in front of the Camera Austria in Graz, 2012.



Photo 2: Begging is illegal in Graz, though when it is enacted like a casual, funny performance it raises smiles, 2012.

1 The fragment belongs to Ioan Panzaru, then rector of the University of Bucharest. The whole speech can be listened as part of my work “The harmless”, available at: <https://soundcloud.com/veda-popovici-1/inofensivii> (in Romanian)

2 The main organizer of the CRIM project is the civic organization Militia Spirituală (Spiritual Militia), concentrated on civil disobedience non-violent direct actions and the financing source is the Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe. See resources on the project on the site of Militia Spirituala: <http://www.militiaspirituala.ro> (in Romanian).

3 See description of this series of events here: <http://www.doitreisi.ro/2012/06/crim-puterea-sta-in-imagina%C8%9Bie/> (in Romanian).

4 The Troika refers to the three organizations which have the most power within the European Union. The three groups are the European Commission (EC), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the European Central Bank (ECB).

5 The gallerist is Dan Popescu, owner of H’art gallery and the art critic is Oana Tănase, then working as a curator for the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest. The entire message read: “H’art gallery and Oana Tănase invite you to a remarkable event: the collective character from the University Square will produce at an hour of maximum audience a complete performance. It is an interactive performance in which you can freely express yourself through all artistic techniques and methods – drawing, collage, photography, music, screaming, smiling, balloons, kissing. The only forbidden artistic mediums are stones. One can swear of mother. And of father.”

6 The author, Erwin Kessler, philosopher, art historian and critic is a popular figure on the local Romanian art scene, a fervent supporter of the neo-orthodox direction in post-89 contemporary Romanian art. The article referred to is “O promiscuitate ideologică, gramaticală și retorică” (An ideological, grammatical and rhetorical promiscuity) published on 24.01.2012, available at <http://www.revista22.ro/o-promiscuitate-ideologica-gramaticala-si-retorica13059.html> (in Romanian). The works he mentions as being “the true manifestos of the movement that started on the 1th of January in the University Square” are the “Four Manifestos of the Harmless Nature” available also in English at <http://veda-popovici.blogspot.ro/2012/01/harmless-nature-manifestos-1.html> and <http://veda-popovici.blogspot.ro/2012/01/harmless-nature-manifestos-2.html>.

7 I have elaborated more on this process in “The Carnival, the Spectacle and the Non-event”, in Bezna zine, available at <http://archive.org/download/Bezna2apocalypseProtestsMarch2012/Bezna2.pdf>

8 Guy Debord, Society of Spectacle, originally published in French, 1967. For all the following notes I used the translated version by Donald Nicholson Smith, Zone Books, 1994.

9 Ibid., thesis 4.

10 Ibid., thesis 184-185.

11 Ibid., thesis 186-188, 190.

12 The Berlin Biennale 7 marks a relevant moment of the intricate relation between art and politics. Along with some participants of the Indignados movement, Occupiers from around the world were called to enact their practices in the context of the biennale. What turned out to be later commonly referred to as “the zoo” was the caged position this group had in the KW Institute for Contemporary Art and the taming process that Occupy practices were put through. It very much looked like something that the rector of the University of Bucharest would love to see: politics framed as art, and thus neutralized, made harmless. The Biennale employed an overidentification method to show the future of the Occupy movement: that of becoming a spectacle itself. By playing out (one of) its most immediate danger(s), the frame of the Biennale brought a thorough critique of the movement and

provoked it to transform itself. In the end, “the zoo” offered some insight of the extent to which art is either harmful or harmless and how this configuration can be used towards either emancipatory or domesticating ends.

13 The organizers cite a dense genealogy of the phrase passing through Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Lenin, Hegel, Augustine. For the statement, program and other resources see: <http://www.truthisconcrete.org/>

14 Gerald Raunig, “Instituent Practices Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming”, translated by Aileen Derieg, 2006, available at http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/raunig/en/#_ftnref17

15 More resources including a video documentation of the “Other Flags” action can be found here: <http://veda-popovici.blogspot.ro/2013/01/other-us--ceilalti-noi.html>

16 According to chapter 4, article 20 from the law 75/1994 in the Penal Code, “citizens have the duty to pay respect towards the national flag and the national hymn and to not do anything that would offend them”.

Veda Popovici works as an artist, theoretician and activist mostly in a dilettante manner. Her interests include collective representations in art, possibilities of creating the common, colonial histories and contemporary power relations in the art system. Currently, she is a Phd. Candidate at the University of Arts in Bucharest with a research on nationalism in Romanian art of the '70s and '80s. She lives and works in Bucharest.